

“Time and the End Times”

Mark 13:24-37

Sermon for the Last Sunday of the Church Year 2021; November 21, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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On this last Sunday of the church year, Jesus once again talks to us about the end of the world. The Apostle Paul says that the form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:31). This world must give way finally to the kingdom of Christ and the new creation, which Christ has in store for us. One thing that looms large in contemplating the end of this present world is time. In fact, time comes into Jesus’s teaching about the end in verse 33: “Be on guard. Stay awake. For you do not know when the time is” (Mark 13:33).

There are three things that are important to take to heart here: (1) that the time will come; (2) whether we can know when the time will come; and (3) whether there is anything that endures through time and beyond time.

The time will come. Jesus states this clearly and plainly. “[T]hen they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26). Jesus will return and bring this present world to an end. It is a date set on the calendar. We have the inside-scoop and the way to be prepared because we have Jesus, the Gospel, and the word of the prophets and apostles.

On this point, there is something that has grabbed my attention about time. It is that the day always rolls around. I was often struck by this when I when I was practicing law in trial work. At the beginning of the case, the trial date gets set. It becomes a set day on the calendar.

I always dreaded Trials. They bring a lot of stress and anxiety for both the parties and the attorneys. There is a finality about them. At the end of it, there will be a verdict and a judgment. How will the presentation of evidence go? Will I get everything in that I need? Will I be able to object to opposing counsel’s questions and respond to the arguments well? It is not unlike a championship game in sports—will I perform my best on that day—though the stakes have to do with real life.

The trial date could be many months away. Yet, it is there on the calendar. When it is far away, one is relaxed and could try to convince oneself—in fleeting moments of fantasy—that the day isn’t real and won’t really come. But that day always does. This is the way time works. It marches forward and in only one direction. A date set on the calendar will come, whether we want it to or not. Our wills and wants are powerless to do anything about it.

There is a date set on God the Father’s calendar. It is the date that this world order comes to an end. It is the day when Jesus returns to earth visibly in great power and glory as the final judge. This day is coming.

This sort of thing about the day coming has happened before. God warned people through Noah that the flood would come. They ignored the warning. It took 120 years, but one day, the flood came.

God promised that one day he would give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the people of Israel. They were in Egypt. One day Moses suddenly shows up with an astounding message for Pharaoh: “Let my people go.” Then there was leaving Egypt, and the Red Sea, and being chased by Pharaoh’s army. Then the wall of water on the right and the wall of water on the left. The people safely passing through. Pharaoh’s army getting drowned in the Sea.

It took 450 years, but the day came.

God promised the coming Messiah, the Christ, the Savior, in whom all of God's redeeming and saving purposes would be accomplished. Then there was the star. Then there were the angels speaking about His birth to the shepherds. Then the man Jesus started preaching one day. Then He entered Jerusalem. Then He hung on the cross: "My God, My God why have you forsaken me" (Mat. 27:46). "It is finished" (John 19:30). Then He rose from the dead, and there was preaching and teaching good news. It took many centuries, but the day came.

The day of Christ's return will come, and all that it means.

And so the question arises: how can we know when it will be? Jesus says a couple things about this. First, He seems to suggest that we can know when in a certain sense. We get this from what He says about the fig tree. When you see the fig tree produce buds, and then you see the buds sprout into leaves, well, then you know that the season of producing fruit has started and that the harvest is near (Mark 13:28-29).

With the parable of the fig tree, I think Jesus is trying to tell us that when the end actually starts, it is so obvious that it is like knowing that the harvest of figs is near once the fig tree buds and sprouts leaves. This has to do with a tribulation that Jesus speaks of before our text. It is a brief period of tribulation that "has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be" (Mark 13:19 ESV). Jesus says that that tribulation will be so bad that "if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days" (Mark 13:20 ESV). We keep in mind that this tribulation is not completely explained by the wars and rumors of wars, and earthquakes, and famines, and natural disasters, and the like, as we talked about last week. Those things happen regularly in human history, but the end is not yet, Jesus says (Matthew 24:6; Mark 13:8).

There is going to be something obvious about the final battle, the final cataclysm. And then Christ says that His return is immediately preceded by the sun being darkened, the moon failing to give its light, the stars falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens being shaken (Mark 13:24). I don't think we will be able to mistake the end when it is actually happening. It takes places on a scale that goes to the core of the created order. But still, it will come suddenly and quickly.

Jesus tells us this because He does not want us to be in the dark about what the end will be like. Therefore, when it actually happens, we can be aware of what is happening and realize that our redemption is near, because our Savior is near.

But there is more to say. The nature of things at the end can come upon us quickly. It is no contradiction then for Jesus to say that no one knows when these things will actually happen. No angel knows. Not even Jesus Himself knows as the Son, but only the Father (Mark 13:32). The actual end comes suddenly. No one knows the date set on the calendar. God the Father has reserved this knowledge for Himself.

And so we come to the third thing. This is the most important thing. It is whether anything endures. Does anything endure the passage of time and the time of the end? Yes, Jesus says. There is something that endures. It is His words. "Heaven and earth will pass away," Jesus says, "but my words will not pass away" (Mark 13:31 ESV). How can this be?

Jesus's words will not pass away, first and foremost, because they are, well, the words of Jesus. Jesus's words are true, and final, and eternal because they are spoken by Jesus. Jesus is true and eternal. He is beginning and end. When the world was created He went forth from God the Father as God spoke. When the world comes to end He comes on the clouds with great glory and all the nations are gathered before Him. He is the finality, the final One. He is the destiny

and the turning of the corner. As such He Himself endures the passage of time and the end of time, beyond the end into the eternal new beginning, where He makes all things new. He shed His blood to accomplish an eternal redemption, to win the new creation, the new beginning. He was dead but then lived again in indestructible life; death no longer has dominion over Him.

When He comes on that Day He will speak nothing different than the Gospel that has been spoken since He rose again and ascended to the Father's right hand. This is the Gospel spoken by the Holy Spirit and written through the Apostles and promised by the prophets that we read and hear in our presence today. It is the good news that sins are forgiven in Jesus Name. Those who are sorry and burdened and admit what is true and right and that they don't measure up, but want to be right with God, the Gospel, the word of Jesus speaks: redemption is won. Sins are forgiven in Jesus Name. Eternal life is given. The New Creation is coming. Life will arise out of death. God's judgment will be turned aside for those believe in Jesus. Believe this and rejoice.

Jesus will speak this same Gospel to you on that Day. In the midst of the passing away of heaven and earth in great tribulation, that is otherwise rather terrifying for human beings, Jesus's words of the Gospel that you have heard will not pass away. They will stand and endure and live forever, even as the heaven and earth pass away. And so you will stand and endure and live forever on that Day in the words of the Gospel, even as heaven and earth pass away around you.

But Jesus will say something more. It is this: Rise and come into the eternal kingdom I have prepared for you. Come into the life of God the Father, with the Son and the Holy Spirit. Come into the new creation, which is created for you in righteousness, peace, and joy. Come into the fruit of my redemption and drink with me anew the fruit of the vine in my everlasting kingdom. Come, be made new, and live in eternal life, where sorrow and groaning of soul fly away and are no more.

He will speak these words to you, who love His Gospel and His Name, who are sorry because of sin and claim the forgiveness and promise of life and peace with God it proclaims and delivers; who love Christ's appearing and long for the completion of the redemption He has begun and will make full and complete on that Day.

And these words of Jesus do not pass away, even as heaven and earth pass away, because they are the words and action of the one who has the power, right, and authority to utter such words. Jesus has earned this right as the Lamb who was slain in the sacrifice of unbounded and unquenchable love. All the host of heaven proclaim that He is the Lamb who was slain, worthy "to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Rev. 5:12 ESV). "He has loved us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rev. 1:5 ESV). His words are eternal.

What joy it will be then, joy inexpressible, for us to hear these eternal words from the One who has the power the right and the authority to speak them, as the form of this world passes away around us: "Come, beloved of My Father. Inherit the kingdom I have prepared from you from the foundation of the world. Come live in eternal peace and joy, in unending life with Me, and the Father, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever in the new creation." These words are true and everlasting for you as you believe and hope in Him. So it will be. And so you will live. Thanks be to God. Amen.